

## **Information on NMFS' November 2000 ESA Listing Decisions for Pacific Hake, Pacific Cod & Walleye Pollock**

**Today's Announcement:** The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) announced that it has made a final decision that Endangered Species Act (ESA) listings are not warranted for Pacific hake, Pacific cod, and walleye pollock populations from Puget Sound, Washington. These ESA reviews were prompted by a February 1999 petition, and are the first of several determinations that will address the ESA status of seven marine fish species in Puget Sound. After reviewing all scientific and commercial information, the agency determined that the petitioned populations are part of larger biological groupings that do not warrant protection under the ESA. However, NMFS remains concerned about the status of Puget Sound/Georgia Basin Pacific hake populations and will retain these on its list of candidate species for future re-assessment.

**Agency Findings:** While the petition requested ESA protections for Puget Sound populations of these three species, NMFS reviewed data across each species' range from Washington to southeast Alaska. The results indicate that the petitioned populations do not qualify as "distinct population segments" (DPS) under the ESA. Instead, they are part of the following larger DPSs:

- *Georgia Basin Pacific Hake DPS* comprising inshore resident hake from Puget Sound and the Strait of Georgia
- *Pacific Cod DPS* consisting of populations from Puget Sound to at least as far north as Dixon Entrance (near the Queen Charlotte Islands, British Columbia)
- *Lower Boreal Eastern Pacific Walleye Pollock DPS* encompassing populations from Puget Sound to southeast Alaska.

**Next Steps:** This is a final determination and will not be re-considered unless NMFS accepts a future petition for these species or the agency initiates its own re-assessment based on new information. Such a re-assessment is anticipated for the *Georgia Basin Pacific Hake DPS*.

**Additional Information:** Get more information on this and other ESA issues by visiting the NMFS Website at [www.nwr.noaa.gov](http://www.nwr.noaa.gov); or by contacting NMFS' Protected Resources Division, 525 NE Oregon St., Suite 500, Portland, OR 97232; or by calling 503-230-5400.

### **Related Questions and Answers**

**Q: Who petitioned to have these species reviewed under the ESA?**

**A.** On February 8, 1999, the Secretary of Commerce received a petition from Sam Wright of Olympia, Washington to list—and designate critical habitat for—18 species of marine fishes in Puget Sound, Washington, under the ESA. On June 21, 1999, the agency accepted the petition for seven of these species, including three members of the family Gadidae ("gadids"): Pacific cod, Pacific hake, and walleye pollock. The remaining species under review are copper rockfish, quillback rockfish, brown rockfish, and Pacific herring.

**Q: Why are these findings late relative to the ESA's "one year finding" requirement?**

**A:** This is by far the largest number of species that the agency has dealt with in a single petition. It needed additional time to search the available information and confer with state and tribal co-managers on that scientific and commercial information. While the available data were far from robust, NMFS was able to compile a considerable amount of information. NOAA Fisheries gained insights on these species by consulting with technical experts from state, tribal, federal and Canadian fisheries agencies. NMFS anticipates that the remaining listing determinations for Pacific herring, copper, quillback, and brown rockfish will be completed by February of 2001.

**Q: What are candidate species?**

**A:** Candidate species are those under agency review, but not yet the subject of an ESA proposed listing. As such, a “candidate” classification affords no special protections under the ESA, but serves to highlight a species of interest. The *Georgia Basin Pacific Hake DPS* is being designated as a candidate for listing because of uncertainties about its overall health and stock structure. The agency expects to receive new information in the coming year that will likely resolve many of these uncertainties. When this information becomes available—and as resources permit—NMFS will re-assess the configuration and risk of this DPS.

**Q: What is a distinct population segment, or DPS?**

**A:** To qualify for a listing as a threatened or endangered species, the petitioned populations must qualify as a “species” under the ESA. The ESA defines a “species” to include distinct population segments, or “DPSs.” On Feb. 7, 1996, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and NMFS adopted a policy to clarify their interpretation of DPS (see

[WWW.NWR.NOAA.GOV/1salmon/salmesa/fedreg/dpspolicy.pdf](http://WWW.NWR.NOAA.GOV/1salmon/salmesa/fedreg/dpspolicy.pdf)). The joint policy specifies key elements that must be considered when making DPS determinations, including:

- the discreteness of the population segment in relation to the remainder of the species (or subspecies) to which it belongs
- the significance of the population segment to the species or subspecies to which it belongs.

While NMFS has developed a specific DPS policy for Pacific salmonids (and refers to DPSs of these species as “evolutionarily significant units”), the agency does not have a specific policy addressing other marine fishes, so relies on principles in the joint agency policy.

**Q: Did NMFS assess risk factors for these species?**

**A:** NMFS considered a number of risk factors that, while not placing the species at risk of endangerment or extinction, do appear to have a strong influence on their abundance. Specific risk factors that warrant close monitoring include harvest, habitat alteration/degradation (especially eelgrass elimination), ocean and climate changes, and predation by marine mammals.

**Q: Does NMFS’ finding mean that these species are healthy in Puget Sound?**

**A:** Not necessarily. Although NMFS does not believe that any of these species are threatened or endangered at this time, some local populations may require special management actions outside

the context of the ESA. Available information suggests that populations of all three species are currently reduced relative to historical levels, and that these reductions may be related to a variety of human-induced impacts on the Puget Sound ecosystem.

Fisheries managers in the state of Washington have recently classified a number of populations in Puget Sound as depressed or in critical condition, and harvest management schemes have been implemented to protect specific stocks. Such changes have included restrictions on harvest techniques (such as banning bottom trawls in south Puget Sound), reductions in bag limits, and expanding the designation of marine protected areas. NMFS will continue to encourage these and other conservation efforts in Puget Sound to ensure the long-term health of these important marine resources.

Figure 1. Distinct Population Segment (DPS) boundaries identified by the NMFS Biological Review Team for petitioned populations of Pacific cod, Pacific hake, and walleye pollock.

